

A New Church For an Old Mission

There had been a fiesta in the little village of Tumacacori. The church which the people had worked so hard to build had been dedicated. Grandfather Ignacio leaned back against the adobe wall of his house. He smiled as he looked at the lovely church. Quietly, a small hand slipped into his and a small head leaned on his shoulder.

“Mis nietos (grandchildren), it has been a long, happy day,” he said to his two grandchildren.

“Si, abuelito (grandfather),” Francisco replied. “Tell us the story about how we came to have our church -- please, please?”

“Please, please!” added Maria.

“I can tell you what your great, great grandfather told me about how it all began.” Maria and Francisco snuggled closer while their grandfather began his story.

“Many years ago, my grandfather Havani (Raven) and his family lived in a mud hut, or ‘ki.’ There were several of these mud and stick houses on the banks of the river. Our people called themselves O’odham, but the Spanish called us Pima.

Havani and his sister, Heosig (flowers) helped their family grow corn, beans and squash using water from the river. To carry their food and other things, Heosig and her mother used baskets they wove from beargrass and willow.

Her mother could weave a basket that was so tight that it could hold water, but they usually used an olla made of baked clay for water. The women also ground corn and mesquite beans to make flour using a mano and metate.

Children played the stick game Ginz, and another game in which they tossed corncobs and tried to catch them with a stick holder. This took more skill than luck.

One day Havani and Hoesig’s cousin Anostuat (Brave Man) from the Tohono O’Odham, the ‘people who live in the desert,’ came rushing into the village with news to tell the family. ‘There is a black robed man with light colored skin who visited some of our friends who live south of here. He brought strange animals called horses which let him sit on their backs. They also had others that looked like huge tame deer with horns, like we’ve never seen before!’ Anostuat said the Black Robe told them of a new religion which used the cross as its symbol.

This was big news! The older people in the village talked for a long time. Finally, the village decided to make crosses of sticks to present to the Black Robe, and to invite him to come to Tumacacori.

In a village southwest of here, they met two Black Robes, or Jesuit priests, named Father Eusebio Francisco Kino and Father Salvatierra.

Even though the Padres (fathers) were tired from travelling, they came to visit Tumacacori. The people of the village built three ramadas -- one for Father Kino to use when he held a church service, and two to live under. He promised to return and bring cattle, for they had no farm animals. He said that he would also bring wheat, which they could grow in winter, and fruit trees.

So the little ramada became the first church here, and the little village became a 'mission' of the King of Spain. Father Kino visited Tumacacori once or twice a year for twenty years until he died in Magdalena. Then other priests came. The priests who stayed in our village taught the people the new religion, and to speak as they did – in Spanish. The priest was our people's teacher, doctor and builder, just as our own Father Liberos is today, almost one hundred years later.

When my grandfather, Havani, was Mayordomo, or head of the mission, at Tumacacori, some of the Pima Indians farther south of here went to war against the Spanish because they felt the Spanish had mistreated them. More than one hundred people died in the war, and after it was over, the Spanish built a fort, or Presidio, in Tubac.

My father, Jose, remembers they were happy to have the soldiers close by, as the Apaches were coming into the Santa Cruz Valley to steal our livestock. By this time, we had large herds of cattle and horses at the mission. The Apaches lived by hunting and gathering native food, so they didn't stay long in one place. They really liked to take our horses, and sometimes killed our people when they came on raids.

After many years, the black robed Jesuit priests had to leave. Then the gray-robed Franciscans came to our village.

By the time I was your age, our village had begun to out-grow the small church the Jesuits had built. Some of us had traveled to the south and admired the lovely churches. So we were excited when Father Gutierrez started to talk about building a new church at Tumacacori.

To help us build a new one, a master builder came from near Mexico City with a small crew. The missionaries had already shown us how to make mud into blocks called adobe. Now we learned how to heat some of the bricks in a kiln to make them stronger. The men of the village built the walls and brought limestone to make lime for plaster, and trees for the beams in the roof.

We all helped to make our church. Mis nietos, I even saw you helping mix the mud for adobe with your bare feet!”

Francisco giggled, and Maria said, “It was fun to feel it squish between my toes!”

Grandfather continued, “And your mother and aunts helped by making beautiful clothes for the Santos (religious statues of saints). We had only the heads and hands of some of the Santos, which had been sent from Europe or Mexico City. We made frames so that we could dress them, and put them in niches in the church.”

“And, abuelito,” said Francisco, “I know the priest let you help decorate the pillars. What an Honor!”

“Well,” said grandfather, “It has been a wonderful day. Now we can go to Mass in our beautiful new church that we all helped to build.”

